

The Russian Orthodox Church urges the government to hold dialogue with the public

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Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, referred to the post-election protests in his call on the Russian government to listen to the voice of society and to modify its political course. The Patriarch warned that the country cannot afford to have another revolution. At the same time, he remarked that the Russian Orthodox Church does not take a position on the dispute between the government and the opposition, and that its voice cannot be politicised. His remarks came on 7 January during an interview on the Rossiya state television network, on the occasion of the Orthodox Christmas. The Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for Relations with Society, protopriest Vsevolod Chaplin, also urged dialogue between the government and the public.

Commentary

- These declarations by senior members of the church hierarchy prove that, according to the Orthodox Church, continually ignoring the tensions in society may blow back against the ruling elite. In its call for dialogue, the Orthodox Church – which so far has been loyal to the Kremlin – is attempting to loosen its ties with the state authorities and create an appearance of neutrality. It is thus insuring itself against any socio-political changes in the country which might be caused under the influence of the protests. Regardless of how the protest movement develops and the government's reaction to it, the Church aspires to be a civic authority and a bond between the government and society, and does not want to lose its current influence in society (54% of the population has declared its full confidence in the Church).
- These remarks are not anti-government in nature, and do not constitute a serious change in the close relations between Church and state. Its call for dialogue does not imply any criticism of the government. It remains in the Church's interest to preserve the *status quo* in the country; in recent years it has made considerable profits from its cooperation with the Kremlin, and has won for itself tax exemptions, subsidies for rebuilding the church's infrastructure, access to state media, and has recovered property it lost after the 1917 Revolution. Through its close contacts with the government, the Orthodox Church has gained a privileged position in relation to the other religions in Russia. The Kremlin has been using the Church for political purposes, making Orthodoxy a part of the new state ideology and the self-identification of the Russian people, as well as to promote Russia

and support its interests abroad, particularly within the CIS. Senior government officials, led by President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, have moulded their own positive image by participating in religious ceremonies, as they did during the Christmas season just gone.

- While Orthodoxy is the dominant religion in a multi-faith Russia, the potential for the Orthodox Church to influence the Russian people's social attitudes is limited (according to the Levada Center, 76% of citizens declare themselves to be members of the Orthodox Church, but their religion is mostly symbolic and is an element of tradition; only about 2-3% of believers regularly attend services). We should thus not expect this appeal by the Church's hierarchs to strengthen their position in society and make it a credible mediator between people and the political authorities, even if the Church does have ambitions to play such a role.